



Parchman Farm: Photographs and Field Recordings: 1947-1959

Bruce Jackson

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In 1947, 1948 and 1959, renowned folklorist Alan Lomax (1915-2002) went behind the barbed wire into the Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman. Armed with a reel-to-reel tape deck--and, in 1959, a camera--Lomax documented as best an outsider could the stark and savage conditions of the prison farm, where the black inmates labored "from can't to can't," chopping timber, clearing ground and picking cotton for the state. They sang as they worked, keeping time with axes or hoes, adapting to their condition the slavery-time hollers that sustained their forebears and creating a new body of American song. Theirs was music, as Lomax wrote, that "testified to the love of truth and beauty which is a universal human trait." Their songs participated in two distinct musical traditions: free world (the blues, hollers, spirituals and other songs they sang outside and, when the situation permitted, sang inside as well) and the work songs, which were specific to the prison situation.

A chilling account of how slavery persisted well into the 20th century in the institutionalized form of the chain gang, *Parchman Farm* includes two CDs with 44 of Lomax's remastered audio recordings and a book of more than 70 of Lomax's photographs, many published here for the first time.

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